

# Moving A Stone Building:

## A Centennial Year for Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center

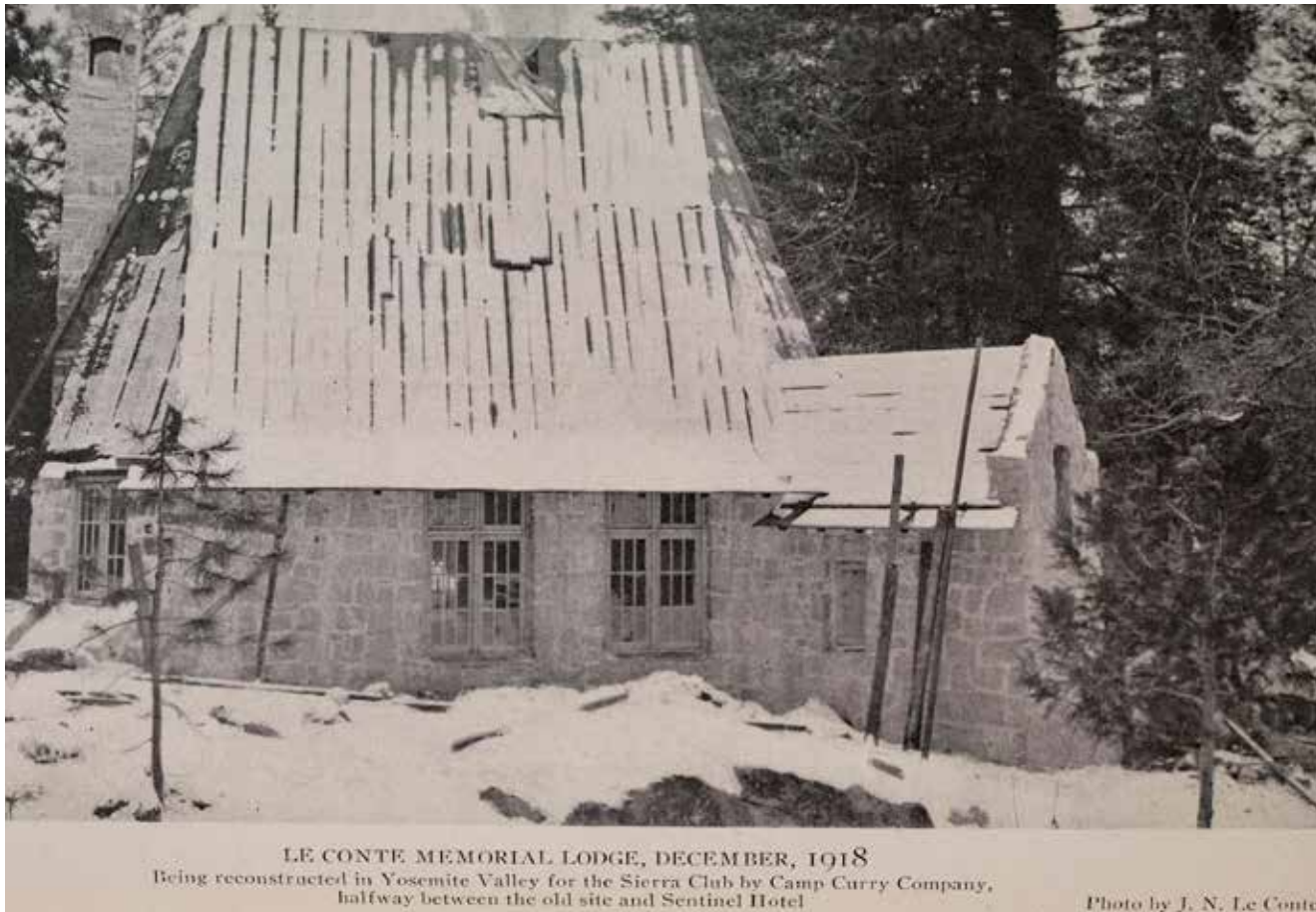


Photo by Jeremy Evans

This year is cause for a centennial celebration. In June 1919 the Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center (formerly Le Conte Memorial Lodge) reopened to visitors, having been dismantled and moved in 1918 from Curry Village to its current location across from Housekeeping Camp, at Bus Stop 12. Let's explore the history behind the epic move of the building named for the famous geologist Dr. Joseph Le Conte.

At the request of the Sierra Club, Le Conte Memorial Lodge was designed by the San Francisco-based architectural firm of Bernard Maybeck, under the direction of John White. Set on a gentle slope to the southwest of the present-day amphitheater in what was in 1904 called Curry Village, the cost of construction was \$5,000. The Lodge was fabricated with Merced River rock. The steep-gabled roof and exposed coastal redwood scissor-trusses and hammer beams exemplify a Maybeck structure and capture the verticality of Yosemite Valley. A dedication ceremony was held on July 3, 1904.

In 1898, prior to the construction of Le Conte Memorial Lodge the Sierra Club, at the invitation of the California State Board of Yosemite Commissioners, established a presence in Yosemite Valley. The Club rented two rooms in a small cottage on the south side of the Valley and set up a "Reading Room." Supervised by a custodian, the facility included a library, photographs, an herbarium (a collection of dried native plants), and maps.

Dr. Joseph Le Conte was a member of the faculty at the University of California and a founding member of the Sierra Club. During Le Conte's first trip to Yosemite in 1870, he befriended John Muir and recorded his trip in *Ramblings through the High Sierras*. Curry Village was a hub of activity in the summer of 1901 when Sierra Club members, including Le Conte, were about to embark on their first High Sierra hike to encamp in Tuolumne Meadows. Le Conte suffered a heart attack and died in his Curry tent on the morning of July 6. Knowing he would have insisted the group continue on to Tuolumne, the Sierra Club would soon determine that a fitting memorial would be a permanent information center, replacing the rented rooms at Sinning Cottage.

With the expansion of Curry Village in 1918, the Camp Curry Company offered to move and rebuild the Lodge, at a cost of \$3,500, without expense to the Sierra Club. Stonemasons were hired to reconstruct the walls. The scissor trusses and hammer beams were disassembled and trucked to the new site, as were the windows, door, and the bronze relief of Dr. Le Conte that was set in place over the mantle. In design the building is the same shape and size as the original structure with the addition, in 1918, of a window located in each wing facing to the northeast and northwest corners. Look for the window on the northeast corner with a half-moon! In addition, two roof vents that opened from within the building with long ropes were removed and a concrete

floor was installed to replace the wooden floor. The significant modification was structural. Whereas the original facade was constructed of Merced River rock, the walls of the new edifice incorporate some of the original rock (look for them when you visit) with rectangular blocks of quarried granite from near Raymond, California at the Knowles Quarry, located north of Coarsegold off Highway 41. The walls according to Dr. Le Conte's son, Joseph Nisbet Le Conte, were "substantially built," and the new site was more attractive, providing a magnificent view of Yosemite Falls and Half Dome.

On May 15, 1919, custodian Katherine Stout found the Lodge incomplete. When materials arrived and weather permitted, the building was again under way. Le Conte Memorial Lodge opened on June 5, amid the noise of nail-driving. Throughout the season the building was crowded with visitors with nearly 2,800 names appearing in the register at the time of closing. According to Stout, "a fine innovation was the series of lectures on subjects pertaining to Yosemite Valley, given by the University of California Extension." With the growth of Yosemite Valley as a destination for nature seekers, Stout realized there would be an increasing need for the Le Conte Memorial Lodge library and education center.

The most famous custodian was a young Ansel Adams, who joined the Sierra Club, and arrived at the Lodge in 1920. During his first season the number of visitors was

nearly 5,000. The library, herbarium, and photographs were in constant use and a series of lectures were held. The following year a telephone was installed. Adams continued his tenure as custodian until the end of the season in 1923.

Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1987, the Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center (YCHC) is operated by the Sierra Club as a public service to Yosemite National Park visitors, under an agreement with the National Park Service. Through the effort of Sierra Club volunteers and a curator, the YCHC continues the Sierra Club's legacy inspiring generations to enjoy, explore, and protect the natural world.

Open from May 1 through September 30, Wednesday through Sunday, from 10am until 4pm, the Center offers interpretive exhibits, a natural history library, and a children's library and activity corner. Free programs are presented on Friday and Saturday evenings at 8pm.

- Story by Bonnie J. Gisel, Ph.D., Curator

*[In 2016 the Sierra Club requested that Yosemite National Park rename the Lodge. Dr. Le Conte, who moved from Georgia to California to teach geology at the University of California, had in the 1880s and early 1890s published theories of racial inferiority, disenfranchisement and segregation, theories not supported by the Sierra's commitment to justice, equity, and inclusiveness for all people.]*